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PROPRIETARY AND SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARIES

BY

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CHAPTER V

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A.L.A. MANUAL OF LIBRARY ECONOMY

Chapters and Authors

Types of Libraries

I. "American Library History," Mr. Bolton. Printed.
II. "Library of Congress," Mr. Bishop. Printed.
III. "The State Library," Mr. Wyer. Printed.
IV. "The College and University Library," Mr. Wyer. Printed.
V. "Proprietary and Subscription Libraries," Mr. Bolton. Printed.
VI. "The Free Public Library," Miss Lord. Printed.
VII. "The High-School Library," Mr. Ward. Printed.
VIII. "Special Libraries," Mr. Johnston. Printed.

Organization and Administration

IX. "Library Legislation," Mr. Yust. Printed.
X. "Library Architecture," Mr. Eastman. Printed.
XI. "Furniture, Fixtures, and Equipment," Miss Eastman. Printed.
XII. "Administration," Dr. Bostwick. Printed.
XIII. "Training for Librarianship," Miss Plummer. Printed.
XIV. "Library Service," Dr. Hill. Printed.
XV. "Branch Libraries and Other Distributing Agencies," Miss Eastman. Printed.
XVI. "Book Selection," Miss Bascom. Printed.
XVII. "Order and Accession Department," Mr. Hopper. Printed.
XVIII. "Classification," Miss Bacon. Printed.
XIX. "Catalog." Miss Hiss. In preparation.
XX. "Shelf Department," Miss Rathbone. Printed.
XXI. "Loan Work," Mr. Vitz. Printed.
XXII. "Reference Department," Dr. Richardson. Printed.
XXIII. "Government Documents," Mr. Wyer. Printed.
XXIV. "Bibliography," Miss Mudge. Printed.
XXV. "Pamphlets, Clippings, Maps, Music, Prints." Printed.
XXVI. "Bookbinding," Mr. Bailey. Printed.

Special Forms of Work

XXVII. "Library Commissions and State Library Extension, or State Aid and State Agencies," Mr. Wynkoop. Printed.
XXVIII. "The Public Library and the Public Schools," Mr. Kerr. In preparation.
XXIX. "Library Work with Children," Miss Olcott. Printed.
XXX. "Library Work with the Blind," Miss Chamberlain. Printed.
XXXI. "Museums, Lectures, Art Galleries, and Libraries," Mr. Rae. Now in hand.
XXXII. "Library Printing," Mr. Walter. Printed.

V

PROPRIETARY AND SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARIES

C. K. BOLTON
The Boston Athenaeum

Since the days of Nineveh there have been almost as many administrative forms of library control as there are centuries. The temple library with its priestly divinators, the Royal library with its masters of law and languages, the monastic library with its scribes, each had its special epoch in which it flourished and developed a system of library management. With the change from clay and papyrus to parchment, Greek and Roman culture grew, and then the advent of the printing press gave to the western world all the wealth of thought that had been treasured in clay and parchment.

Gradually the way has opened for great libraries of reference and then for circulating collections of books. These circulating libraries were at first of two kinds, subscription and proprietary. The payment of an annual fee or subscription entitled a person to a year's enjoyment of literature. The fee, if small, provided books poor in quality and manufacture, and the bakery or stationer's furnished an inexpensive domicile. Thus the subscription library held sway in the pathway of least resistance. It did not satisfy persons of wealth and taste, but it did serve women who wanted fiction and men who frequented mechanics' institutes and kindred trade societies. Its symbol has always been the buff paper jacket with its printed label. The subscription library has kept to its province, although, as Greenwood says of English mechanics' libraries, being "poverty itself," it has not met the finer needs of the community. Where the dues have been high, above the usual five shillings annually in England or two

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cents a day here, it has been difficult to differentiate subscription from proprietary libraries as to their success. Franklin's library of 1731 in Philadelphia was in its origin of the subscribing mechanic type, but perhaps because he was himself of large mould he founded a library which became more akin to the stockholders' or proprietors' library of our own day.

The library founded at Edinburgh in 1725, another in London in 1740, and the famous Lyceum library founded in Liverpool in 1758 match in time and size the Library Company of Philadelphia (1731), the Company of the Redwood library at Newport (1747), the Charles-Town Library Society, established in South Carolina in 1748, and the New York Society library of 1754. These libraries represent more or less completely the principle of corporate ownership instead of fees, and, if we judge by their atmosphere, there is just the difference between the proprietary and the subscription library in the attitude of its patrons that there is between the proprietor of land and the tenant.

Since the year 1850 the word "public" in library usage has become nearly an equivalent for "free," yet in the exact sense the proprietary library, though not free, still is a *public* library, just as a tavern is a public house or a stage-coach is a public conveyance, to be distinguished from the gentleman's private library and a man's house or carriage. The statutes of many proprietary libraries require each share-purchaser to be approved by the trustees, yet in practice this provision often either has fallen into neglect or its observance has become purely formal.

The proprietary library flourished greatly just before the reorganization of social forces that have brought about our modern democracy—a democracy of trade schools and state universities, of municipal free baths and concerts, of free clinics and other provisions for social betterment. The modern public library in the United States is a product of this democracy; it offers to all classes, differing both socially and intellectually, the

books which are adapted to the varying tastes of a community. It is no mere sop to the poor, as too often is the case in England or on the continent. But the underlying principle of social mingling, in so far as it denotes a new experiment in democracy, will require the power of virgin soil for its successful development. The proprietary library, on the other hand, is of the warp and woof of organized society. As men acquire culture and wealth they come together to enjoy literature and art, it may be in the Serapeum at Alexandria, in the house of Aristotle at Athens, or in a library built up but yesterday and maintained by kindred spirits. We hear it said that the public library is to take the place of the older type. If, however, as Mayor Gaynor said at the dedication of the beautiful new public library building in New York, all true progress is very slow, then the fraternal ideals of the public library movement will not supplant in one century or in ten the race instinct which unites "birds of a feather."

At the Narragansett Pier Conference the round table on proprietary libraries brought out many contrasting virtues of the older and newer types. Said Mr. Swift:

"If the proprietary library seems to be an aristocratic institution, let it go at that. It is relatively harmless as compared to more serious causes of separation of class from mass. Furthermore it would be a mistake to think that the proprietors of these libraries are all highly prosperous; many of them doubtless deny themselves other extravagances to obtain the modest privilege of getting books to read in a place and in a manner which suits their fancy."

Before turning to the other side of the picture, let us read Dr. Fletcher's ethical defence of an exclusive library—a defence that a century ago would not have been thought necessary outside of France. He says: "There will always be those who object to proprietary libraries, as to private schools, on political and social grounds, charging against both a tendency to foster

class distinctions in the community. Only under Socialism could it be fairly claimed that education should be the same for all. If the state allows people of means to dress better than those who are poor, it will also allow them to provide themselves either individually or collectively with such education and such opportunities of culture as may suit them best. Unless the American people come to care less and less for the things of the spirit, it cannot be otherwise than that those who have means will combine in associations of one sort or another in which they can secure intellectual advantages not open to all."

When we admit that the proprietary form of library is of the era of chivalry, of regal seclusion, of jealous regard for property rights, of the tie of church and state, we confess that this is not its golden age. Is it then to die or is it merely at the wrong end of the arc which the social pendulum makes in a period of years? It thrives only where there is a large population of wealth, as in Boston and Philadelphia, or one of high culture, as in Providence, under the shade of Brown University. Even so favored, its fortunes fluctuate with changing tastes and shifting centers of residential fashion. A large endowment will be its only security in periods of inefficient administration and unattractive interior or surroundings.

Of public libraries Mr. Swift writes: "With all the restrictions and hampering elements confronting them, they are fortunately in the main currents—they profit by public criticism and even by abuse. Competition urges them forward, however slowly, and they have the necessary and wholesome stimulation of responsibility to the general opinion." On the other hand, it may be said that it is often more difficult to arouse a public library board out of lethargy because public officials entrenched in a non-salaried position are re-elected from force of habit. The trustees of a proprietary library are intimately known to a large proportion of the shareholders, and social pressure becomes almost as effective and much more expeditious than the ballot.

The public library pay-roll is, on the whole, more the home of social derelicts than is that of its rival. This is partly due to the prevalent idea that public office, of a literary nature at least, is a reward to the aged and a solace for the unfortunate, and to the fact that the class interested in proprietary libraries encounters fewer persons in pressing need of employment.

The firmer tenure of office in the semi-private library tends to hold the efficient librarian. The public librarian in a contentious city is ever looking for a safer berth. Civil service for the protection of expert civic servants would do much to relieve good librarians from worry, but in the choice of heads of libraries so much of personality is demanded in addition to administrative and technical ability that rigid civil service could not be looked upon as an unmixed blessing. To quote Mr. Swift again: "The proprietary librarian fortunately is not called upon to assume the complicated rôle of a high-class janitor, caterer, and department store manager; he may still walk in the fear of God and not of a board of aldermen, loving, knowing and cherishing his books, courteous and helpful to his constituents. I am glad that he still holds his gentle sway in our midst, though my vision tells me that the weariness and solicitudes of our own contact with a more real life is the nobler task because it is not along the primrose path."

In the past many proprietary libraries have been turned over to become the foundations of public libraries. Either too feeble to survive, or willing to foster the rising tide of popular culture, they have contributed much to the new democracy. The moth that dies in giving birth to another generation can make no greater sacrifice than some of these old and historic institutions have made. The fruits of noble industry and thrift, the results of civic pride and self-denial, have thus after years of toil been offered to the new library. If social progress upward is only at the expense of man's suffering and labor, our broader education is built firmly on the contributions of early

merchants, clergymen, and other men of wisdom and influence who a century ago created proprietary libraries in America.

The privileges once allowed only within proprietary doors are now extended with almost equal freedom to frequenters of the town library. The more aristocratic institution cannot in our day claim greater luxury of equipment, finer architecture, or more expensive books. The more evident advantages of the proprietary library are passing away. The more subtle attractions, still manifest but hard to describe, must be nurtured with zealous care by the proprietary librarian, and upon his success in this field of effort will depend the survival of the institutions now under his sway.

Franklin has described how he brought together fifty persons, mostly young tradesmen, who gave forty shillings each and agreed to pay ten shillings per annum for a library. With a liberality characteristic of Franklin's influence, the library was to be free for reference, and indeed the first benefactor, a London mercer, called it a "public library." In the published histories of the New York Society library, the Redwood library, and Quincy's History of the Boston Athenaeum, the first steps toward the successful organization of a proprietary library are made evident. In "A book for all readers" Ainsworth R. Spofford described the founding of such a library: "A canvass should be made from house to house, with a short prospectus or agreement drawn up, pledging the subscribers to give a certain sum toward the foundation of a library. If a few residents with large property can be induced to head the list with liberal subscriptions it will aid much in securing confidence in the success of the movement, and inducing others to subscribe. No contributions, however small, should fail to be welcomed, since they stand for a wider interest in the object. After a thorough canvass of the residents of the place, a meeting of those subscribing should be called, and a statement put before them of the amount subscribed. Then an executive committee, say of

three or five members, should be chosen to take charge of the enterprise. This committee should appoint a chairman, a secretary, and a treasurer, the latter to receive and disburse the funds subscribed. The chairman should call and preside at meetings of the committee of which the secretary should record the proceedings in a book kept for the purpose."

A proprietary library is founded upon an issue of shares of stock, the institution thus becoming a corporation. The owners of shares have entire control of the property, exercising every function of administration not expressly delegated by the corporation's by-laws to the trustees. It often happens, then, that the trustees reply with truth to a request for favors that they have no authority to grant such favors, since all power rests in the proprietors. Usually, however, so great is the desire of the owners of a literary institution to advance scholarship that they authorize the trustees to grant privileges to distinguished strangers and to serious students who wish to make limited use of the library.

In the case of the New York Society library the ownership of a share does not bring exemption from annual dues unless these dues have been commuted. Of about 725 shares now owned the great majority are unassessed. In the Boston Library Society the dues must be paid, whether books are taken out or not. This provision would seem to discourage the perpetual ownership of a share by a family some of whose generations may not care for books. Possibly as a result of these provisions the value of such shares is usually low—fifty dollars or under. At the Boston Athenaeum the share gives an indisputable right to use the library, a fee being charged only to those shareholders who wish to take books from the building. A share may be held without payments if the owner does not care to take books out, but merely reads in the building, or holds the share because he prizes it for its associations. Athenaeum shares, with a par value of $300.00, have almost

always been sold in the market above par. The New York Society library and the Providence Athenaeum have successfully introduced temporary subscribers. While this brings a ready income and benefits the poorer students and writers, it would seem to discourage ownership of shares and the cultivation of a proper pride in being a part of the institution. The Society library, so fully described by Dr. Keep, attracts an increasing proportion of annual subscribers, while the shareholders are less numerous than of old.

To some extent these varieties of policy may, in successful proprietary libraries, be justified by local conditions; but it would be well to make a study of each plan of control as a first step toward a more intelligent understanding of the effect of each system, even if it did not lead to a more uniform regulation of the use of shares. These libraries are passing through a period of trial, not alone from competition, but from changing environment. To survive they must adjust themselves to the conditions of the new century. But after all this is no unusual task. Every institution, the school, the church, the government, the supreme court itself, must in some measure conform to the thought and feeling of the time. If this be the only test necessary to continued usefulness in the community the proprietary library need have no serious fear for the future.

At the Narragansett Pier Conference Mrs. Stone urged that the browsing habit, so dear to essayist and poet, is fostered by the sheltering walls of the shareholders' library. The public library, quick to seize for its readers every attractive feature of its ancient rival, has come to see the value of open shelves and quiet alcoves. The alcove, so universal architecturally in the older type, has, in spite of its waste of space, been adopted in the newer buildings of the better class, as at Brookline in Massachusetts. There one finds secluded corners for the perusal of books, beautiful walls, and book cases in

natural colors of wood, all to entice the dreamer as well as the searcher for knowledge.

The proprietary library has influenced profoundly the development of the free library, and shareholders, while loving such stateliness and quiet as will comport with ancient folios, must nevertheless feel the efficiency of the neighboring city library, and they will wish to see some of its best features adopted by their own institutions.

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PUBLICATIONS OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION PUBLISHING BOARD

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A.L.A. Catalog, 1904-11. Edited by Elva L. Bascom. Cloth, $1.50, postpaid.

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